

## Backbone Lake Friends Group Unveils New Playground

by Michael Dhar

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DUNDEE - A pair of foil-encrusted novelty scissors glinted in the sun, but the smiles shone just as brightly. Approximately fifty people turned out Sunday, August 29 for the official unveiling of Backbone State Park's new playground. The ceremony capped 2 years of effort and fundraising by the Backbone Lake Friends Group, a coalition of 12 concerned citizen volunteers.

Group member Roger Thomas-a State Representative from Volga-and Group President Ed Gibbs of Dundee cut a big yellow bow tied across a stairwell, officially opening the \$40,000 playground. The ceremony followed an hour-long open house at the park's beach house featuring ice cream and speeches by state and local park officials.

"I'm really tickled to be in what I consider Iowa's flagship state park," said State Parks and Preserves Bureau Chief Kevin Szczodronski, who traveled down from Des Moines to attend the event. "I challenge you to go through the gates of any of our state parks, and you'll be impressed."

The Backbone Lake Friends Group began fundraising for the playground in 2002 by selling "script bricks" at \$40 apiece. They sold 528 of the bricks that bear donors' inscriptions and that now pave the playground's entrance. These volunteers raised the rest of their roughly \$24,000 in funds by collecting pop cans. Remaining funds for the project came from the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, which donated \$15,800.



A brown and forest-green jumble of plastic tubes, slides, and lookout towers, the roughly 60-by-40-foot playground attracts kids of all ages. Thomas and Gibbs took an inaugural spin down the playground's spiral slide after cutting the ribbon. A crowd of eager youngsters in the audience followed closely on their heels.

"It looks wonderful," said Eugene Meyen, who attended the ceremony. "Anything that you can have as an attractant for young people will benefit the park, most definitely."

Park Ranger Dave Sunne began the open house by thanking the Friends Group and all the Park's other volunteers, including Boy Scouts, campground hosts, and Orville Newell, who runs the Park's CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) museum.

"You have been a constantly busy and productive organization and we really can't thank you enough," Sunne said.

The Friends Group began life in 1997, when a group of concerned citizens helped save Backbone Lake. They "organized and accomplished the impossible" by excavating 150,000 tons of silt from the 20-acre lake, Sunne said. Since then, they have conducted numerous projects, including installing riprap around the lake, planting 100s of trees, and conducting fishing derbies and Halloween hikes.

District Parks Supervisor Jerry Reisinger praised the group as well, and called attention to another volunteer project completed in early August. Local businessman Dave Nedding, Strawberry Point business Seedorff Masonry, and others refurbished a set of stone portals on the Park's northern entrance. Predating the CCC, the eighty-year-old entrance badly needed repair. Seedorff Masonry performed an estimated \$10,000 worth of work at no cost to the Park.

"Too often we don't have money for these things," Reisinger said. "The entrance piers are very important. Subconsciously they prepare you for the park, for the type of architecture you're going to see. They tell you to slow down."



Szczodronski also spoke about his vision for all of Iowa's Parks, laid out under his "State Parks 2020" agenda. He proposes to organize a statewide group of energized volunteers, donors, and others to put Iowa's parks in premier condition by their 100th birthday in 2020.

"What I'm looking for is nothing more than a Friends group for the entire state," he said. "Wouldn't it be nice, in 15 years, to have a state park system that is a premier system in country?"